DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 385 426 RC 020 277

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TITLE	Middle Level Education in Rural America. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Charleston, WV.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-RC-95-7
PUB DATE	Sep 95
CONTRACT	RR93002012
NOTE	4p.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC/CRESS, P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325-1348 (free).
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Educational Objectives; *Educational Strategies; Interdisciplinary Approach; Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; *Middle Schools; Rural Education; *Rural Schools; School Size; Skill Development; *Small Schools; Student Development
IDENTIFIERS	Developmentally Appropriate Programs; ERIC Digests; *Standardization

ABSTRACT

This digest describes the development of the standard middle school and its impact on rural areas, discusses the original goals of middle schooling, and suggests how rural schools can meet these goals despite their small size. The earliest middle schools were innovative rural junior high schools that enriched their programs with additional electives and age-appropriate activities and experimented with team teaching and flexible schedules. By the early 1970s, however, middle school designs had become somewhat standardized and a formula for a successful program began to emerge. The small size of most rural middle schools, which were sometimes dependent on the high school for shared facilities and teachers, seemed to preclude having a "true" middle school. In some places, a belief in a critical scale for the standardized middle school program (believed to be 800-1,200 students) led to school consolidation and the building of large regional facilities. However, it is important for small rural schools to focus on the goals of middle schooling that seek to meet the many needs of the preadolescent learner. These goals include academic achievement, development of learning skills, and personal development. While larger middle schools address these areas by employing standard components, small schools may use other strategies that capitalize on the many benefits of small school size. The digest briefly discusses such small-school strategies, describes promising innovations for the future, and suggests additional readings. (SV)

ED 385 426

MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION IN RURAL AMERICA

ERIC DIGEST

By: Jon W. Wiles

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RC020277

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EDO-RC-95-7 September 1995

Middle Level Education in Rural America

Jon W. Wiles

ERIC DIGEST

THIS DIGEST DESCRIBES the development of the standard middle school and the impact that development has had on rural areas. The Digest then describes the original goals of middle level education and how rural schools can accomplish these goals despite their small size.

Middle Level Education in Rural America

The earliest middle schools were innovative junior high schools in rural areas (Gatewood, 1975), but by the early 1970s the movement toward middle schools had spread to suburban, then urban areas. An early survey by Alexander (1968) identified 300 such schools; by the early 1990s, the number had risen to 8,500. In the 1990s, the middle school design was by far the dominant curriculum form for middle level education in America.

In rural school systems, the first junior high schools usually were introduced under less than ideal conditions. Most early rural junior high schools were housed either in the same building with the high school (7-12) or in a former high school building that was, in many ways, dysfunctional to program development. Further, in many districts, the junior high school was perceived as a sort of training ground for the high school, where athletes and even teachers and administrators were prepared. Small school size regularly forced the rural junior high school to share teachers and facilities, almost always as a "junior partner." Traditional activities such as sports events, dances, and marching bands gave the junior high schools identity, but at the same time prevented them from developing more age-appropriate strategies and programs.

In the early 1960s, innovative principals in rural junior high schools began to enrich their programs with additional electives and age-appropriate activities. Popular innovations such as team teaching and flexible schedules found their way into these early forms because they afforded the curricular flexibility needed to serve a complex student. Without serious regulation, and with energetic personnel, many of these early rural middle schools became identified in the literature as models.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, middle school designs began to take on a more standardized character. In conferences and state association meetings, middle level educators shared ideas and practices, and a kind of formula for a successful program began to emerge. School staff organized teaching teams that shared common time, space, and students. These core teams planned together while their students went to specialty classes (physical education, art, music). Staff developed an interdisciplinary curriculum and, in enrichment programs, students sampled several short courses during the school year. Creative, flexible schedules allowed for constant updating and change. Guidance programs led by teachers but designed by counselors became popular, and intramural sports replaced interscholastic sports.

This formality of the middle school design created problems for many rural educators wishing to have a *true* middle school. Sharing facilities and teachers with the high school often meant little flexibility for scheduling, teaming, and enrichment activities. Small faculties precluded common team planning time. Personal counseling sometimes challenged community values. Intramurals stripped away both the tradition of the junior high school and the identity of the community.

In many rural areas, reaching a critical scale—believed to be 800 to 1,200 pupils—for a standardized middle school program often led to proposals to consolidate small rural districts and build large regional facilities. It is an oversimplification, however, to say that middle schools caused rural consolidations. In the period between 1930 and 1950 (before middle schools) the number of districts in the United States declined from 127,000 to 80,000. But certainly, in the 1970s and 1980s, the creation of a middle school program provided a rationale for rural school consolidation. The shrinking of the American high school population (from 15 to 11 million students in the 1980s), however, was the more powerful factor that precipitated the middle level education crisis.

Goals for Rural Middle School Programs

As rural middle schools combat traditional problems such as relatively small size, isolation, and dependence on the high school, it is important to focus on middle-level education goals. The significant change introduced by the American middle school during the past 30 years has been to broaden the scope of the curriculum to meet the needs of learners. In their literature, middle schools espouse a program designed to meet the many needs of the preadolescent learner, and rural middle schools must focus on how they can best accomplish this task given their condition.

In the United States, the average school enrollment is 488 pupils, and most rural middle schools are much smaller than average. In fact, in the early 1990s there were still 3,800 schools in America with fewer than 300 pupils (Sietsema, 1993). Obviously, the standardized model so often described in the literature is not attainable in many rural school districts.

Traditionally, the American middle school has three targeted domains in the curriculum: *academic achievement, learning skills,* and *personal development.* While larger middle schools may address these areas by employing standard components, rural middle schools need not do it the same way.

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In the area of *academic achievement*, for instance, small rural schools are dependent upon the high school for specialization and depth. Scheduling is often disrupted by the priorities of the high school, and the problem of scale precludes the activation of true interdisciplinary teams. Most of these perceived difficulties are easily overcome in rural middle schools. The need for academic depth is minimal in grades 6-8, where exploration appears more important than mastery. In many states, teacher certification allows for more flexible use of staff, and the absence of the Carnegie unit frees the program from being dominated by a six-period yearlong format. Most rural middle schools feature teachers who teach two or more subjects plus an elective of some sort. The time for four-person interdisciplinary team meetings is found at the beginning or end of the school day or by use of early-release days. Two-member teaching teams, with each teacher covering two subjects, are most common.

Most middle-school theorists hold that developing appropriate *learning skills*, not mastering subject matter, are the keys to high school achievement. In schools where teacher teams analyze test scores and target specific skills, such learning can be reinforced across the disciplines. Also, computer labs can supplement teacher delivery in developing learning skills. A 3-year effort to build attitudes and skills can be supported by having teachers move across grades with classes or by having a teacher-advisor follow a student throughout the middle school years. Student skill profiles, life skill learning, and reinforcement for skill development in grading practices have been found to increase effectiveness in developing students' learning skills and attitudes.

Finally, in the area of *personal development*, rural schools have a great advantage in being small enough to allow teachers and staff to really know students. Rather than scheduling advisory classes twice a week so that some teacher will know each student, teachers in rural schools tend to know and advise students on a more informal basis. Frequent, and often social, contact with the community's parents and service agencies allows teachers to provide more consistent, informed guidance in the growing-up process.

Support for Smaller Rural Middle Schools

Educational research supports the many benefits of small school size: a more positive attitude toward school and greater parental satisfaction, student participation, and attendance have been documented time and again. Small schools have been shown to have lower dropout rates, in general, and superior achievement among students from lower socioeconomic status homes (Howley, 1994).

If there is a criticism of the small, rural school in the research literature, it is that often the school is unable to provide a full curriculum offering for each student. For the most part, this reference is to the academic curriculum, not to the wider enriching academics and extracurricular options. From the standpoint of middle level curriculum, the rural school may often be found to provide a more nurturing and satisfying program for preadolescents than a larger model found in suburban or urban environments. For example, in the area of guidance, the larger schools provide a teacher-led guidance program because the average counselor-student ratio is 1:450. In rural schools, smallness may facilitate a much more effective delivery program just by virtue of size.

Rural Schools and the Middle Level School of the Future

Recent developments provide additional promise for rural educators at the middle level. Not only have the past 30 years brought a new and independent mission for this school form, but many of the elements vital to developing a successful school are very accessible in a rural community. Consider the following factors:

- In the academic area, technology promises to help educators overcome the traditional problems of smallness and isolation in rural communities. Informed utilization of computer software programs, the Internet, distance learning, and video transmissions can help schools compensate for small libraries and shortages in specialized teachers. In Texas, for instance, TI-IN broadcasts specialized instruction to classrooms by satellite from a single studio in San Antonio.
- Community involvement, long associated with effective schools, can be readily activated in close-knit rural communities. Rural middle schools that discover the power of community resources and business partners can greatly enrich their programs.
- New ways of using buildings, not as the sole place of learning but as an organizing center for learning activities, can be carried out in rural settings. Action learning is age-appropriate for the middle school, and students can learn important life skills by becoming actively involved in community affairs. The Kellogg Foundation has funded numerous projects that demonstrate how these relationships can be structured.
- Finally, structuring learning as a social activity, rather than as an individual activity, is easiest in a middle school where peer orientation is very strong. The use of instructional strategies such as cooperative learning and authentic (portfolio) assessments holds great promise in rural middle schools.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RR93002012. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI, the Department, or AEL.

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